Systems of Care Policy Action Guide:
Assessment

Assessment of where you are and where you want to be is a critical first stage of a policy initiative (i.e., the development of a new policy or revision of an existing one). The questions that follow focus on:

- Problem and objectives
- Developmental stage and time frame
- Existing policies
- Environmental and contextual factors.

Answers to these questions will help prepare you to select an appropriate policy approach that meets identified needs and circumstances.

Before you begin to answer these questions, your organization or community collaborative already should have identified a problem or issue that you are seeking to address through a policy initiative. If you have not already defined your problem or issue, consider conducting a comprehensive **needs assessment**.

Problem and Objectives

1. What is the **problem or issue** that you are seeking to address through a policy initiative?

   Your problem or issue may reflect efforts to overcome an identified weakness in your local child welfare system or to advance systems reform and/or evidence-based or promising practices.

2. What evidence do you have for the **need for change**?

   How do you know there is a problem? What information (such as Child and Family Services Review data, evaluation findings, policy analyses) can help make a persuasive argument for a policy initiative?

3.   Select the **child welfare principles** that best describe your problem or issue area: (check all that apply)

☐ **Interagency collaboration.** Enhancing how agencies and organizations work together to plan, develop, and coordinate services for children and families.

☐ **Individualized strengths-based care.** Acknowledging each family's unique set of assets and needs and building care plans that draw on strengths while addressing problems.

☐ **Cultural and linguistic competence.** Implementing policies, practices, and services that are responsive to the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and racial diversity of children, families, and their communities.

☐ **Child, youth, and family involvement.** Engaging families and youth as partners in developing their own case plans and in the planning and implementation of systems activities.

☐ **Community-based approaches.** Ensuring the identification, availability, and accessibility of community-based services and supports to address child and family needs.

☐ **Accountability.** Using data to inform decision-making and evaluate the impact of policies, procedures, and services.

☐ **Other.** Specify:

> **Think about:** How can the integration of multiple principles strengthen the response to your problem or issue area?

4.   What **objectives** are you hoping to achieve related to the problem or issue?

How will you know that you are successful in your efforts to address your problem or issue area? For example:

- *Increased use of blended funding strategies for integrated service delivery to at-risk children*
- *Availability of subsidized kinship care*
- *Reduction in disproportional rates of minority children in out-of-home care*
- *Increased youth participation in case planning*
- *Greater availability of in-home services for families in child welfare system*
- *Up-to-date and comprehensive case records for all children in care*

> **Think about:** Are your objectives SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound? How do your objectives contribute to long-term child welfare goals (improving safety, permanency, and well-being)?

5.   What specific **results** are you trying to achieve through the policy initiative? (check all that apply)

☐ Awareness of a problem or issue

☐ Systems change (such as infrastructure development, multi-agency coordination)

☐ Service enhancement (such as quality, accessibility, comprehensiveness)

☐ Changes in practices or behaviors (such as casework procedures)

☐ Funding for programs or services

☐ Other:

> **Think about:** What does research or experience reveal about how policies can contribute to your objectives?

6. Who is the primary **population** of interest?

Who will ultimately benefit from the policy initiative (for example, young children, youth aging out of care, parents with substance abuse problems, kin caregivers)?

> **Think about:** What other groups also will be affected, directly or indirectly, by the policy initiative (for example, child protective service workers, community organization staff, parents, foster families)?

7. In what **geographic area** are you seeking change?

a) Specify by name:

b) Select one geographic area:

☐ Community/neighborhood ☐ City ☐ County ☐ State ☐ Tribe ☐ Region ☐ Nation
☐ Other:

Developmental Stage and Time Frame

8. **How long** has your organization or coalition been working to address this issue/problem? (select one)

☐ Less than 1 year ☐ 1–2 years ☐ 3–5 years ☐ More than 5 years

> **Think about:** Have you had sufficient time to gather data, assess needs, and set the groundwork that may be needed to undertake a policy initiative? If you are just starting out, where does it make the most sense to focus (locally, statewide or nationally)?

9. Within what **time frame** are you trying to accomplish change?

☐ Less than 1 year ☐ 1–2 years ☐ 3–5 years ☐ More than 5 years

Existing Policies

10. Are there **existing policies** that address your problem or issue area?

☐ **No** (Skip to question 12) ☐ **Yes** (Complete the *Existing Policies* table below)

Consider policies (1) at the State or local legislative/executive level; (2) across multiple agencies/organizations; and (3) internal to a single agency.

*For each policy, consider what changes or modifications will support achievement of your objective? What revisions will better align State and local policies with **Federal child welfare laws**? What modifications will reinforce principles of good child welfare practice?*

Think about: Does this policy… Promote collaboration among relevant child- and family-serving agencies and organizations? Encourage and support individualized interventions tailored to the specific strengths and needs of each child and family? Respond to the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and racial diversity of children, families, and their communities? Encourage and support meaningful partnerships between families and professionals? Encourage and support the connection of children and families to community-based services? Promote accountability?

Existing Policies

Policy Name	Year Enacted	Type	Geographic Scope	Facilitator or Obstacle	Needed Changes

11. Are there child welfare **practices** that are not currently aligned with existing policies?

In practice, are policies being implemented as intended?

Think about: If there is a disconnect between policy and practice, is it:

- A problem with the policy itself?
- An obstacle (such as lack of awareness of the policy, lack of skills or resources needed to implement the policy correctly)?
- A potential disincentive (such as performance systems that do not reward the practice, funding structures that discourage the practice)?

Consider whether a policy initiative is warranted or can other strategies be used to better align practices with existing policies (for example, policy implementation manuals, training initiatives, changes in performance monitoring)?

12. Where are there policy **gaps**?

What types of policies are missing (for example, State statutes, multiparty agreements, internal agency policies)? What new policies might advance the achievement of your objectives and promote sound child welfare practice?

Environmental and Contextual Factors

13. What factors **support** a policy initiative?

What driving forces or facilitators support the introduction of a new policy or a change in an existing one (for example, widespread community support, allies in the legislature, success of similar policies in other jurisdictions)?

Think about: How can the following factors contribute to a policy initiative?

- Established relationships and potential partners
- Available resources
- Political/social climate
- Past experiences
- Support among key stakeholders (including partners, community, family members, agency staff)

14.   What factors may **hinder** a policy initiative?

What restraining forces or obstacles may make the introduction of a new policy or a change to an existing one difficult (consider budget cuts, elected officials who do not favor change, history of conflict among key individuals or groups)?

Think about: How can the following factors negatively influence a policy initiative?

- Opponents and sources of resistance
- Constraints on resources
- Political/social climate
- Election cycle
- Potential conflicts with existing policies or plans
- Past experiences
- Existing habits and customs

15.   In addition to a policy initiative, what **other changes** need to take place to achieve your objectives?

What else is needed to support a new or revised policy (for example, hire a program coordinator, conduct supervisory training, develop a monitoring and reporting system)?

Think about: How will policies be reinforced by programmatic changes or development of **infrastructure components** (such as management structure, information systems, communication channels, training and development, continuous quality improvement)?

Wrap Up

Your responses will help you select an appropriate policy approach in the Approach Selection section of the Policy Action Guide.

In addition, printing and sharing your assessment can help your agency or group build support for the policy initiative among key stakeholders.

Logic Models

When planning and evaluating new initiatives, many people find it helpful to construct a logic model. A logic model illustrates the connections between what you are trying to do (the activities you will carry out) and what you hope to achieve in both the short and long term (the outcomes). Think about how your assessment responses can be used to develop a logic model for your policy initiative.

For more information about logic models, see:

- **Logic Model Builders** – Child Welfare Information Gateway

- **Logic Model** – University of Wisconsin – Extension

- **Using Logic Models** – Child Welfare Information Gateway